Political discretion and administrative authority: a comparison of Chief Administrative Officers in 30 countries

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Abstract: Formal politicization is typically understood as the legal authorization of political influence over bureaucratic appointments, yet little is known about how such discretion is structured through institutional design. This paper reconceptualizes formal politicization as an outcome of structural choice, arguing that political actors shape executive organization by allocating discretion over staffing and authority over policy and administration. We develop a two-dimensional framework capturing these design choices and apply it to the institutional configuration of Chief Administrative Officer (CHAO) positions across 30 European countries and the European Commission. Using an original dataset of formal rules governing appointment, authority, and dismissal, we identify four distinct configurations that combine varying degrees of political control and administrative capacity. The findings challenge assumptions of convergence toward meritocratic models and demonstrate how formal institutional design structures the balance between political responsiveness and bureaucratic autonomy in contemporary executive governance.